Collaborating to Win

Managing Competition When We Work Together

By Peter F. Norlin and
Rebecca A. Ripley

The Context of Collaboration

Prologue: The Magnetic, Irresistible Power of First Place. In our work with groups and teams over the last 25 years, we are often asked to help people learn how to work together more effectively and thus become more successfully collaborative. However, to help people understand the rigors and perils of this assignment, we think it's important to expose some powerful competing messages embedded in our cultural context that are likely to muddy any intention to collaborate.

We often use a dialogue scenario, depicted in *Figure 1*, to help people anonymously acknowledge their personal feelings about competition. When we debrief scenarios like these, at least in the United States, it appears that in spite of such anecdotal evidence that the dynamics of competition may not reliably drive people to perform at their best, we nonetheless extol the importance of competition from nursery school to the Super Bowl. And in spite of such personal experience to the contrary, as a culture it would seem that we approach working together, collaboratively, with some ambivalence and inner tension. Our short, informal scenario suggests that while we may be more comfortable and satisfied as individuals when we are not forced to compete, we may simultaneously believe that only competition is likely to drive us to the high performance we crave.

Then why bother organizing ourselves and working in team structures? Why bother making an effort to sharpen our collaboration skills? The business case for collaboration, which we will review below, is strong, and yet we seem to remain ambivalent about committing ourselves to using collaborative skills and structures unequivocally. To unleash the true power of working together, we believe that there are two conditions for success. First, we must truly believe in the utility and power of collaboration as a source of stellar human performance. And then, we must stringently avoid introducing competitive dynamics that will corrupt our efforts to collaborate. We will consider each of these conditions in turn.

The Truth about Competition. While our own personal experiences suggest that there may be a shadow side to competition, i.e., losing, we almost never pay attention to the long-term impact of losing on our behavior in groups, and especially in the workplace. Thus, the question we rarely ask and should probably force ourselves to ponder is: how do people react to losing, and why does that matter?

First, we must take pains to underscore the point that these two dynamics, *competition* and *collaboration,* name an inherent, embodied polarity in human nature: "working against" vs. "working with." Underneath the experience of competition are the clear messages, "I'm the best, and you're not," and "I'm the winner, and you're the loser." This notion of the clear separation between winning and losing is expressed most tartly by Gore Vidal who famously said, "It's not enough to win. Others must lose." At the same time, however, we seem to have another strong push

First, we ask people:
- "How many people believe that competition is the key to high performance?"
  (Everyone raises their hand.)
- "How many people here win all the time?"
  (A few brave people tentatively raise their hands.)
- "How many people win some of the time?"
  (Usually a few more people now raise their hands.)

Next, we typically ask people to close their eyes. Then we ask them:
- "How many people tend to lose more often than they win?"
  (Most people now raise their hands, and I ask people to open their eyes and look around.)
- "So how many people like to lose?"
  (Typically, no hands are raised.)
- "How many people hate to lose?"
  (Typically, all hands are in the air.)

So when we then say to folks, "What have we learned from this informal experiment," it appears that:
- Everyone believes without question in the value of competition,
  BUT
- Most people lose more often than they win, and
- Everyone hates to lose.

Figure 1. Competition Exercise

as human beings: to recognize the value and consequence of working with others, and to combine our collective talents and energies to achieve something that presumably we could not achieve alone.

In our US culture, we have tended to elevate competition as the dynamic most likely to drive great achievement. We also have certain loudly-voiced assumptions about competition that have taken root in the popular culture and that we seem to trust without question. We tend to believe, for instance, that:

» Competition is motivating because we know that we all want to be the best.
» Competition is the dynamic most likely to stimulate our best performance and fulfill our personal potential because we know that to be the best, we will naturally do our best.

» Competition must focus only on the winner(s) because we know that only the best will do.

The question, of course, is: are these assumptions unassailable? To answer this question, we turn now to the world of applied behavioral science and replicable research. Are there any valid, reliable data to explain and make sense of the mismatch between our assumptions and our personal experience?

It appears, in fact, that there are. In Kohn's now-classic text, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (1992), he systematically and rigorously reviewed all the available research evidence that had been collected to date, comparing the impact of competition to collaboration. The results are truly eye-opening, and they

remain unchallenged in the years since Kohn's initial analysis. It turns out that well over 90% of the time in well-designed, carefully-controlled experimental research, these studies demonstrate that collaboration is the situational dynamic that actually leads unquestionably to high performance. Competition comes in a very distant second place, because it turns out that the trouble with winning is losing.

Kohn's book details the full, complex avalanche of evidence that pushes against our intuitive beliefs about competition, but the bottom line is this: when we are competing, we spend a lot of anxious time and energy looking over our shoulders to see what our competitors are doing, and when we deflect our attention to others, this loss of time and energy actually undermines our own performance. The research points to the fact that when we are worried about what other people are doing, we don't do our best work. Because that anxiety takes a significant toll on our performance, it seems that there is a very costly unintended consequence to finding ourselves in a competitive situation. The research overwhelmingly suggests that if we want to see true personal excellence, if we want to see people actually live up to their full potential, then we need to minimize anxiety and isolation, and we need to minimize the dynamic of "me vs. you" and "us vs. them." Because the "versus" clearly means that we all will not share equally in the outcome.

The Power of Collaboration. If this is so, then the question becomes: How do we do our best work? What is the context, the environment, the structure that truly helps us reliably excel? And not surprisingly, the answer turns out to be: collaboration, that is, the experience—and the struggle—of "working with." In a collaborative environment, we can share the wealth of ideas, skills, possibilities, and options with others. However, we also need to be clear about the reasons why collaboration is powerful in a way that competition is not. Why does it have the potential to help us do our best work? Why is it likely to unleash peoples' highest potential for performance?

There are several, probable reasons why collaboration is such a powerful driver

of high-quality work, and Kohn points out research that reinforces these advantages:

» First, we are looking ahead, not over our shoulders. As a result, we are more relaxed and can stay focused on what really matters to us.
» Multiple minds lead to multiple sparking. "All of us" tend to be smarter and more creative than any "one of us."
» Synergy is truly possible. As we have learned from watching systems in action, it turns out that the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts.
» Learning is shared. And the whole system gets smarter together.

These are important benefits in any human system, but they are especially valuable to the businesses and organizations that we serve.

However, from an evolutionary perspective, we are unlikely to eliminate our competitive urges. They are a core part of human nature, presumably hard-wired into us through millions of years of biological imperatives, such as "survival of the fittest." We are stuck with competition, because we are stuck with ourselves. And it is this apparently relentless, inner drumbeat exhorting us to win that makes working with others so challenging.

Fortunately for us as human beings, as workers, and as leaders, the payoffs of collaboration far outweigh the costs—as long as we are smart about creating conditions for success. This is very good news. The competitive challenges organizations face in today's global economy are fierce and unyielding. In order to win in the external marketplace of ideas, products, and services, people must collaborate more and more effectively internally. Based on our experience, we propose that we must use our design skills consciously and explicitly to elicit collaboration between individuals and teams—and that the key condition for success in designing initiatives that seek to exploit the power of collaboration is vigilance.

Our hypothesis is based on our extrapolation from the research profiled in Kohn's text. Specifically, in order to gain the full profile of benefits from collaboration, we must remain relentlessly attentive

to make sure that every process, every activity, every structure we design and introduce fulfills two criteria: whenever possible, people are required to "work with," i.e., opportunities to collaborate are maximized; and people are not expected to "work against," i.e., opportunities to compete are minimized.

Thus, the goal of these criteria is simply shifting the ratio of competition to collaboration, rather than seeking to eliminate competition entirely. We have found that while these two design criteria are easy to articulate, maintaining such vigilance and developing a truly collaborative work environment is extremely difficult to achieve. The following case represents an example of an initiative where we were able to remain sufficiently mindful, fulfill our customers' expectations, and orchestrate a shift that enabled increased internal collaboration to create a more successful external competitive stance.

Collaborating to Win: A Case in Point

Occasionally, we are given an opportunity to test our assumptions about these design criteria by being asked by a client, who is either curious or convinced about this research, to develop a "culture of collaboration" in a specific segment of an organization. While it is rare to find a senior leader who is willing to request a complete organizational overhaul by bucking the assumptions about competition that we have outlined, we have met leaders who have had the courage to experiment with the possible power of collaboration in contained situations, and we will share one of these experiences here.

A few years ago, one of us was asked to work with the claims and service

division of a large insurance company to consolidate these two related customer functions into a single area, integrate their work processes where possible, and create an experience for external customers that would seem truly seamless, regardless of entry point. Traditionally, while there was typically a good deal of interaction between these functions as claims were investigated and service requests were fulfilled, and both functions were located side-by-side on the same floor, they were clearly two different operations with two different cultures. As in many work environments where people have different, though related contacts with business customers, these cultures began to operate as separate "tribes," speaking the same language in different dialects, and living side-by-side without obvious conflict, but with a clear awareness of "us" and "them," marked both by jokes and occasional jabs.

As we began work on the project, we realized that we would have to re-evaluate and revise our design more rigorously than usual, because unless we were consciously vigilant, we were likely to make choices and decisions unconsciously that put people in competitive situations and relationships. We found that unless we continuously checked and re-checked our design strategies, we could not be sure that we were successfully maintaining our intention to promote collaboration. To guide our design decisions and to maintain our vigilance, we first generated a few guidelines, synthesized from our experience and Kohn's examples that we used throughout this project (see *Table 1*).

With these in mind, and with the involvement of an eight-person design team that included a microcosm of employees from different levels and job roles in

---

Table 1. *Simple Guidelines for Diminishing Competition*

1. In this activity or experience, will people be asked to compare themselves with others in some direct or indirect way? If so, re-design. *(Comparison is a prerequisite for competition.)*

2. If there is some kind of comparison, will some people be rewarded, either tangibly or intangibly, based on that comparison? If so, eliminate these consequences. *(Rewards increase the visible chasm between winners and losers.)*

3. Is there the possibility that, over time, through this comparison and reward, a recurrent category of "winners" will be created? If so, use a strategy to provide recognition and reward to the group-as-a-whole. *(Failing to reward a small number of "winners" is preferable to unintentionally creating a large pool of "losers.")*

Figure 2. Claims and Service Division

Phase 1: Making Work "Whole." In many ways, this project incorporated familiar elements of a classic work re-design model that brings people with different, related job roles together into cross-functional, "whole job" teams. This integration was completed during the first phase of the project, and after assigning several teams to each supervisor from the former management structure, we hoped that over time, with coaching and support, they would become progressively self-managing (see *Figure 2*).

Before we reached this goal, however, and as teams were initially adjusting to this new, consolidated structure, we began to introduce policies and practices that subtly shifted peoples' past experience with competition in this claims and service area. To reduce a natural, former inclination to
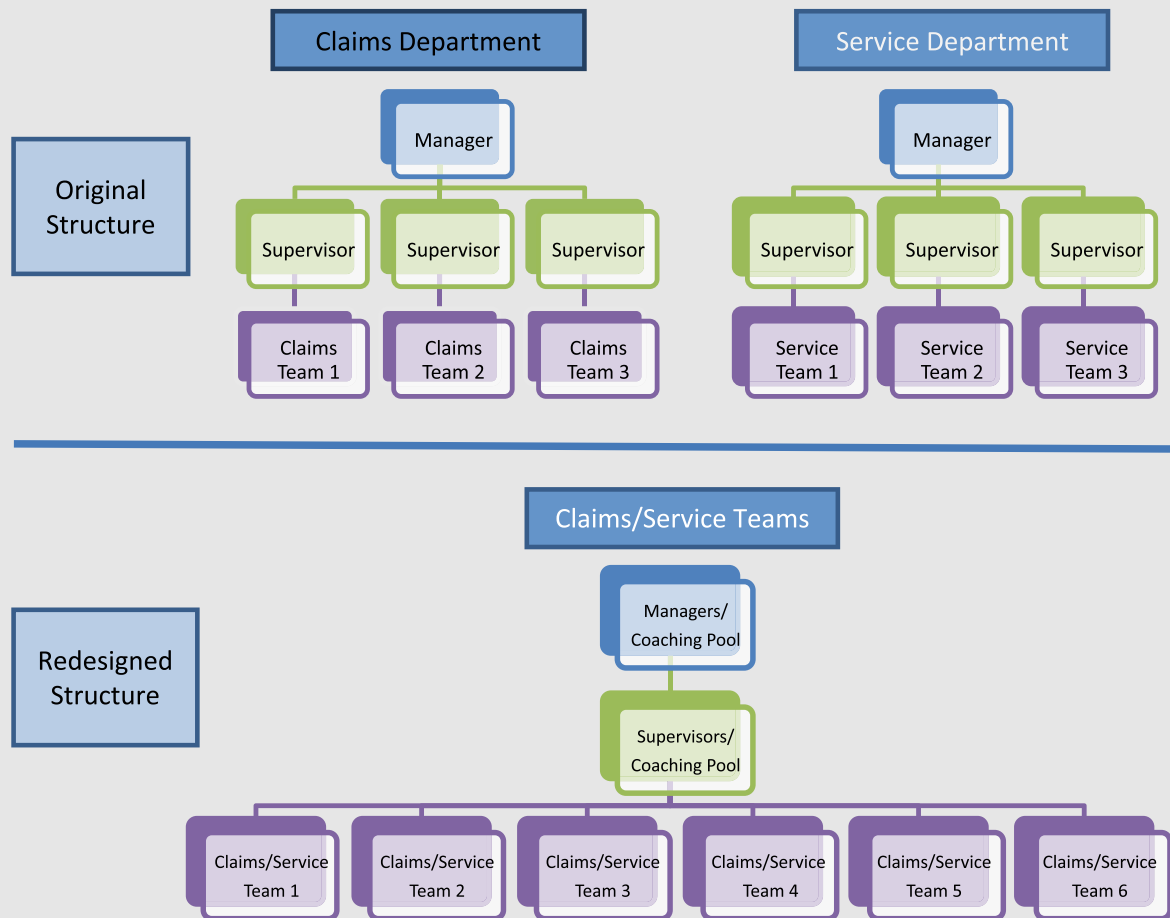
both claims and service, we began to implement a multi-phase process to fulfill the expectations we outlined above.

compare and compete, we first blurred the boundaries between the two, formerly separated work streams, "claims" and "service," by presenting the work of the Division as a unified operation. After collapsing its name from "claims and service" to "claim service," Division logos, e-mail signature blocks, and Division signage were then changed to reinforce this newly-coupled relationship.

Phase 2: Measuring Collective Performance. As we have suggested, in these situations the goal is not eliminating competition, but managing it consciously and intentionally. Here, for instance, while the performance of the claims and service areas was typically tracked by different metrics, there were several key measures of customer satisfaction that were both shared and compared. In the past, we had heard, "So who's better this month, Claims or Service?" In other words, who was the winner? To shift this perception, we chose

to collapse these two, overall groups of metrics into a single figure for the old division structure, month by month, over the preceding calendar year, and we then presented the same figure, computed for the newly-reorganized division, beside the previous year's performance for comparison. In essence, then, the entire division was now competing against its former incarnation, instead of between functions, and because performance measures rose steadily from the very beginning, people began to express a new sense of internal solidarity, pointing out "how much better *we're* doing now."

Phase 3: Competing for Improvement. In much the same way, at the group level, while we tracked the ongoing performance of each separate, integrated team and made that information available to each team privately, the only metric we reported—and presented publicly—for each team, was for its poorest performance, and again, we

tracked that measure visibly over time. We worked to eliminate cross-team comparison by asking each team to focus on competing with itself and narrowing its greatest gap. Since all teams had performance gaps, we chose this strategy to encourage teams to look at their performance as a "whole picture," and to help them learn to tolerate and explore their "learning edge."

Phase 4: Collaborating for Improvement. Since our ultimate goal was to promote greater collaboration, we also assigned teams that had their best scores on a particular measure to coach teams with their lowest scores on that measure and to focus on improving that specific aspect of performance. In this case, then, every team only knew how other teams were seeking to improve, over time, their specific performance in a particular area, and teams became extremely invested to helping other teams improve in these target areas.

Phase 5: Rewarding Collective Improvement. As we mentioned, the Division's overall reward structure was based on the teams' collective, aggregated results, so it was in everyone's best interest to leverage individual strengths to help each other succeed. Initially, we created a separate "rewards" team, staffed with a representative from each work team, to participate in conversations with Human Resources compensation professionals, and to develop a Division reward strategy that linked financial reward to a progressively increasing, Division-wide performance metric. Soon after the project began, we visibly charted the Division's weekly performance on a graph displayed prominently in the area, we consistently pointed out and celebrated progress, and we posted the associated monetary reward that was added to the total for later distribution.

Interestingly, any competitive energy in this process was centered around which teams were consistently acknowledged as more effective coaches in their ability to elevate other teams' performance. To channel this acknowledgment, an intangible, informal reward structure was created to differentiate the impact of specific team coaching relationships. Each team was

given a "coaching message board," and teams that appreciated the quality and impact of coaching from another team were encouraged to write and post these appreciation messages on their coaching team's board.

Phase 6: Developing Collaborative Team Leadership. Finally, at the individual level, as part of our effort to develop a collaborative dynamic on these cross-functional teams, we introduced a process to enable members to share team leadership. First, we asked all team members to identify

individual strengths and to minimize both comparison and, ultimately, competition.

Given its many moving parts, this project was designed to unfold over a ten-month period, and we waited, somewhat anxiously, to assess its impact. Doing our best to compare apples to apples, we chose to combine the division's overall customer satisfaction scores from the previous year for the claims and service areas, and compare them to the collapsed performance results from the newly-consolidated division. After a year, we found that our efforts to create a more collaborative team

> Interestingly, any competitive energy in this process was centered around which teams were consistently acknowledged as more effective coaches in their ability to elevate other teams' performance. To channel this acknowledgment, an intangible, informal reward structure was created to differentiate the impact of specific team coaching relationships. Each team was given a "coaching message board," and teams that appreciated the quality and impact of coaching from another team were encouraged to write and post these appreciation messages on their coaching team's board.

the specific cluster of leadership tasks that would be required to support the entire team's accountability, and we then invited members of each team to informally assess their own personal capacity to demonstrate each behavior on this profile of leadership expectations. After team members reviewed their personal assessments with team colleagues, they were encouraged to assign responsibility for specific leadership tasks to those members who had acknowledged a potential skill in that area. Once an audition period had either confirmed or disconfirmed this initial assessment, team members took responsibility for assuming these different leadership roles, performing them successfully, and then "passing the baton" when other leadership skills were called for. While there were certainly times when individual team members were less than stellar in performance for a variety of reasons, this structure was designed to use

environment in the division had resulted in a 43% rise in customer satisfaction and a 32% drop in customer complaints.

And what did we learn from this experiment? Our conclusions seem simple in principle, and yet we still find them extremely difficult to replicate in practice. The first, and most important, is also the hardest to follow: because competition is such an intuitively natural, seemingly correct way to arrange human experience, it takes a rigorous commitment to ensure that we are actually able to manage it, and able to minimize it when needed. The second guideline is perhaps just as difficult to implement: if we design a process, activity, or structure at work that ultimately invites comparison—between departments, groups, or individuals—it is also likely to evoke a competitive dynamic. We need to be both active and creative when we notice it, since an invitation to compete is likely to

send a message that will overshadow any effort to promote collaboration.

**Stepping Up to Collaboration:
Why We Should Try This at Home**

These lessons—and assumptions—need to be evaluated in other situations, of course, because helping our clients to develop the mindset and micro-skills for effective collaboration needs to be an essential practice of our profession. It is the context in which many other core outcomes of good OD work—clarity of purpose, creative insight, and shared commitment—can flourish, and it serves as a key condition that triggers their emergence and release. Fortunately, as consultants, we have the opportunity to hone this essential practice by forming communities of like-minded, values-oriented, creative professionals who are willing to embody our belief that collaboration is also at the heart of our own work. Because if we truly believe this, then we also know that it's the way we must work with one another as consultants: as trustworthy colleagues, as partners, and as team members.

By helping our clients become more successful at collaborating with each other, we give them a gift: the ability to access and release their own highest potential for successful performance. However, in order to give them this gift, we must first give it to ourselves. And how do we do this as organization development professionals? In order to model the potential power of collaboration for our clients, how do we ourselves learn to access it, practice it, and minimize the power of its "shadow side?"

We believe there are at least three ways to achieve this outcome:

» Through *intention* to increase the conditions that promote internal collaboration and to rigorously manage the conditions that trigger competition.
» Through *mindfulness* to recognize, through conscious attention, when this balance has been altered to allow collaboration to "break out"—that is, when collaboration is increasing and competition is being managed successfully.

Peter Norlin, PhD, formerly the Executive Director of the OD Network, has spent 30 years in the field of OD. He works now as an external consultant, managing his own practice, ChangeGuides, and serving as a Senior Consultant with Innolect, Inc. and The Leadership Development Group, and as a Consultant with Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group. A graduate of The Johns Hopkins University Master's Degree Program in Applied Behavioral Science/Organization Development, he also has an MA and PhD from Northwestern University. His teaching experience includes faculty appointments at Vanderbilt University, Johns Hopkins University, and Georgetown University. Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, he is also a professional member of the NTL Institute. He can be reached at *pnorlin@charter.net*.

Rebecca Ripley, MS, is a Senior Consultant with Innolect, Inc., an organization development consulting firm that equips high-impact leaders to build positive legacies and unleash organization potential. She also partners with BoldWork, a firm committed to creating work places where people and organizations thrive. Ripley specializes in leadership development, coaching, and maximizing human potential. Clients include AbitibiBowater, Federal Reserve Board, FedEx, Moen, and Pfizer. Ripley has been a member of the Adjunct Faculty of Tulane University, the University of New Orleans, and Johns Hopkins University. Recent publications include *Leadership Coaching: The Fast Track to Effectiveness* and *Winning by Thinking Around*. She can be reached at *beckyr@innolectinc.com*.

» And through the development of *specific skills* to achieve this new, critical balance, specifically building the capacity that allows us to consciously become more collaborative and less competitive.

Here is our challenge, which is based on a strongly-held assumption that generates an equally firm assertion: we can only build this capacity in our clients if we build it in ourselves first (or at the very least, simultaneously). We do not believe we have a choice about this. Quite simply, unless and until we can practice what we preach, we won't be either credible or successful in our work.

References

Kohn, A. (1992). *No contest: The case against competition*. Boston, MA: Hougton Mifflin.